The Filthy, Fecund Secret of Emilia-Romagna

It's Italy's unsung region, yet its food has conquered the world—or at least the table. Think prosciutto di Parma, Parmesan, porcini, and half of all pastas known to man (just for starters). The source of its power? Po Valley dirt—fine, dense, almost chocolaty, accumulated over millennia. PATRICK SYMMES feasts on the cities of the plain

THE SOIL IN THE ARDA VALLEY WAS, IN the first days of September, already furrowed for a second crop. Everywhere we looked, right beside the roaring A1 or at some forgotten crossroads amid collapsing farmhouses, machines had plucked the harvest and turned the ground. Emilia-Romagna, the flat northern heartland of Italian farming, was combed into neat rows. Everywhere we paused, we stared in disbelief. Finally, outside the supermarket in Lugagnano Val d'Arda, I stepped in among the clods. ¶ If you've ever gardened, you know the feeling I had. The dirt—millions of years of silt, washed down from the Alps and Apennines and deposited into this great bowl by the flooding of the Po River—lay meters deep. It is a rich brown humus, fine, dense, almost chocolaty. This stuff—mere dirt—is the building block of the wealth, strife, and food of the Po Valley, the great plain at the heart of Italian agriculture. ¶ The story of Emilia-Romagna is the story of that soil, which grows the grass that feeds the cows that flavor the milk that makes the Parmesan cheese taste so good just down the road in Parma. This is the soil that sprouts the corn and wheat that fatten the pigs that become the ham that becomes *prosciutto di Parma.* This is the brown muck, fantastically productive, that grows the Trebbiano grapes, cooked down into the aged vinegar *balsamico di Modena,* in the town of that name, just another half hour along the A1. And beyond that, right down the curve of the immense plain—the largest flat place in Italy—all the products of this soil have been gathered into Bologna, one of Italy's great, innovative trading cities, whose nimble-minded gourmets invented much of what passes for Italian food around the globe. Ravioli? Tagliatelle? Lasagna? Polenta? Tortellini? Half of all pasta shapes? All from Emilia-Romagna. If your mouth is not watering, stop reading here.

Consuming passion: Bologna's Via Pescherie Vecchie ("Street of the Old Fisheries") sells more than just seafood. It's one of Italy's best food markets.

The soil next to the supermarket in Lugagnano wasn't just brown and rich: It was practically alive, a tightly packed silt that the machines had turned up into chunks the size of dinner plates. I prodded one with my foot. "The size of dinner plates," I said to my wife, awed.

"Bigger," she corrected. Some of the pieces were the size of serving platters.

If you want to know how Emilia-Romagna has conquered the world, one table at a time, you need only look down.

WE HAD RENTED A stone house in Castelletto, an obscure village high up in the Arda Valley. It proved to be a steep hamlet of stone houses, many empty, and about forty year-round residents, mostly old women. Ours was the only rental property in Castelletto, found online. It had good views, modern everything, and it rattled in the fierce mountain winds.

Our son, Max—a precious bundle, aged fourteen months—attempted his first steps in Castelletto's empty playground. We took our first steps too: awkward greetings in Italian, and a quick scamper to the valley's most famous site, the fortress town of Castell'Arquato. I struggled up the medieval keep with Max on my back,

How green is my valley: The Po River's frequent floods made Emilia-Romagna's soil uncommonly rich. A historic note: Although Mussolini was born here, the region was an anti-Fascist stronghold.

PLACES & PRICES

ITALY TO YOURSELF

Emilia-Romagna has gemlike cities—Parma, Ravenna, Bologna, Ferrara, Modena—and few foreign visitors. All the better for enjoying its famous farmhouse restaurants, historic inns, and hands-on cooking classes. For details, see **page 188**—but *shhhh*, don't tell anyone. . . .

and we surveyed the views up the Arda—an ugly dam, and then the gentle Apennines, sharing a border with Tuscany. In the other direction was the great flat plain of the Po River.

Our goal was to go local in every sense: language, cooking, daily life. By staying in this small town for a week, we could wander far and wide through Emilia-Romagna but always come back to a single point—depth in Italy rather than breadth. We gathered fallen apples from our yard and fed the baby apple-mush that had traveled only a few yards in its life. I studied Italian. We walked, cooked, and made slow but encouraging progress in befriending the town's elderly doyennes, who were enthralled by my son's head of Irish hair. *Il bimbo rosso,* they called him: the red baby. *Che bello.* The village was dying, demographically, but EU money had paved even the smallest roads, flavored the local tomatoes with farming subsidies, and put seven sheep and an Audi in the same yard. The houses were in good repair—the children and grandchildren returned on weekends for the essential rituals of Italian family. Rural life was sustained on this high-fat diet of state support, provincial support, supranational subsidies, and an enthusiastic public willing to pay for good, local, traditional foods.

We followed our landlord's tip farther up the Arda Valley to Cà Ciancia, an *agriturismo,* or farmhouse that takes in guests—an embodiment of the last of these trends. We parked against giant hoops of hay and walked past a small barn full of cows, pigs, and rabbits. In the

PEARLS FROM SWINE *Emilia-Romagna is the promised land of piggy pleasures*

ZAMPONE MODENA

Province of Modena

WHAT IT IS

Pig's feet stuffed with pork meat, skin, fat, and spices, boiled until soft, traditionally served over lentils on New Year's Eve. Originated in the sixteenth century.

HOW IT TASTES

Rich, unctuous texture and rustic, almost gamy taste.

CULATELLO DI ZIBELLO

Province of Parma

WHAT IT IS

Back leg muscle rubbed with wine, salt, pepper, and garlic; stuffed into a pig's bladder; tied in a pear shape; and aged at least one year. Made south of Parma, where the damp, heavy air off the Po River enhances the meat's sweetness.

HOW IT TASTES

More refined than prosciutto, with complex layers of spice. Purists say it must be cut by hand into irregular slices.

MORTADELLA DI BOLOGNA

Province of Bologna

WHAT IT IS

Bastardized the world over as bologna. The real thing is pork ground to a paste in a mortar, seasoned with myrtle berries, mixed with cubes of hard neck fat (must be fifteen percent), and cooked slowly. Invented by friars in the sixteenth century.

HOW IT TASTES

Pale pink slices with soft, velvety texture and mild aromatic flavor.

COPPA PIACENTINA

Province of Piacenza

WHAT IT IS

Meat from behind the neck, massaged with salt and spices, left in a cold room, and then cured at least six months. Produced in Piacenza, in areas less than three thousand feet above sea level.

HOW IT TASTES

Deep red with delicate white marbling; fragrant, with cinnamon and clove.

PROSCIUTTO DI PARMA

Province of Parma

WHAT IT IS

Whole haunch salted and slowly dried for at least one year. Made only in Parma, from pigs raised on grain and whey of Parmigiano Reggiano. Dates to 100 B.C., when Cato wrote about the process of curing pork in barrels of salt.

HOW IT TASTES

Rose-colored meat cut paper-thin; silky texture and subtle sweetness.

kitchen—half a dozen local women roasting and knifing—these ingredients were cooked and served a few yards from where they were born. In both dining rooms huge collective meals were in progress, a dozen people at one table, eighteen at the next. The food—truffled anolini, pork loin with crisp potatoes—can only be described by my wife's abrupt declaration, just halfway through, that "this is the greatest meal of my life."

Food has to come from somewhere. Emilia-Romagna has beauty in it, but also more hog processors than ruins, more grain silos than medieval towers (and they have a lot of medieval towers). In the Po Valley, "what you see is what you smell," Bill Buford, author of *Heat,* a tale of learning to cook Italian, explained to me. That can mean foodie bouquets of simmering sauce, rich cheese, and roasted chestnuts, but, Buford noted honestly, "even the fog smells like pig poo."

ASK AN ITALIAN WHERE THE best food comes from, and he will mention his mother, and then his home region. But if pushed, many will admit, as one Roman told me, "Of course, there is Emilia-Romagna." Why here? Good dirt, to be sure, but also rotten politics that created concentrated Renaissance wealth, and aristocratic rulers like the Estes, a clan that rivaled the Medici, sprinkled castles throughout Emilia-Romagna and practically invented the culture of banqueting and conspicuous consumption.

Then there is what the British explorer Richard Burton, writing in 1876, called *sveltezza d'ingenio*—the mental agility, the inventiveness—that is key to the region. Design and industry are fused in local brands like Ferrari, Ducati, and Lamborghini. Reggio Emilia, a quiet university city in the west, perpetually jousts with nearby Parma for the highest per capita income in Italy.

Yet Emilia-Romagna is a kind of lost region for foreigners, known, if at all, for its gemlike cities—Parma, Modena, Bologna, Ferrara, Ravenna—rather than its awkward hyphenated name, rooted in the ancient disputes of the Gauls and the Romans and pronounced with an almost silent *g.* The various cities have been rivals throughout history, pitted against each other like pawns in war and peace, swapped and traded among dukes, emperors, and popes. Naturally resistant to agglomeration, they have preserved and cultivated styles, habits, food specialties, and personalities that are independent of one another (the Parmese are reserved, the Modenese vivacious, and the Bolognese consider themselves the best lovers in Italy, or so the story goes).

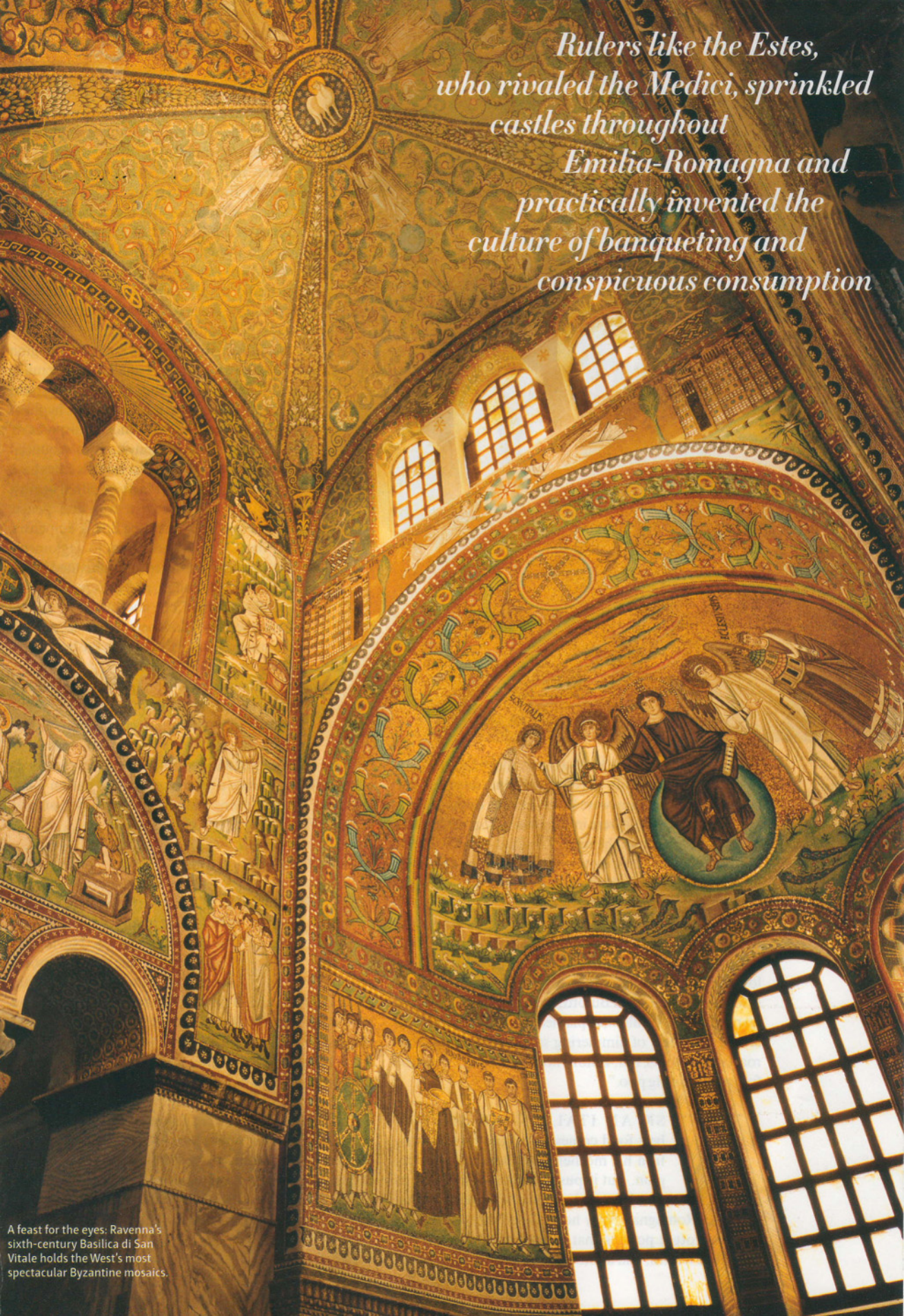
As an identity, Emilia-Romagna exists chiefly on maps, which show it as a series of highways and train lines connecting outside places that are more important—Milan in the west to Florence in the south to Venice in the north. Forty million tourists a year come to this nation—two for every three Italians—but typically they just pass through Emilia-Romagna in transit.

So it is overlooked.

Fine. More for us.

See additional images online at cntraveler.com/italyfood.

Rulers like the Estes, who rivaled the Medici, sprinkled castles throughout Emilia-Romagna and practically invented the culture of banqueting and conspicuous consumption



A feast for the eyes: Ravenna's sixth-century Basilica di San Vitale holds the West's most spectacular Byzantine mosaics.

LIKE A GOOD DETECTIVE STORY, Ferrara benefits from what is missing: The dog didn't bark and the tourists didn't come. Of those forty million annual visitors to Italy, I literally did not see another during five days in Ferrara. Boasting an idealized layout, and claiming to be Europe's first planned city, Ferrara lies on the northeasternmost plain of Emilia-Romagna, alternately bathed in summer heat and winter fog, and ignored by all but the most discerning travelers—chiefly Italians seeking some authentic piece of their own nation that has not been squeezed through a tourism machine.

Ferrara benefits from the quiet: Although it is common in Emilia-Romagna for cities to ban traffic in their central zones, in Ferrara the bent alleys of the entire core are pedestrian-friendly. The clattering of wheels over cobblestones and the polite tinkle of bicycle bells may be the loudest sounds you encounter here. For us, wielding a small baby through the region, Ferrara offered a secure and confident respite, where our son could practice his walking freely, at no risk greater than a bombardment of kisses from neighborhood *nonnas.* (When my wife took him walking outside the hotel at 6:30 in the morning, I could track their progress by the faint cries of *"Bambino bellissimo!"* and *"Che bello!"*)

Since Roman times, a road—the Via Emilia—has run straight through Parma, Modena, and Bologna, to Rimini, but Ferrara lies off this access. Ferrara's relative isolation led to stagnation and noble rot; in 1786, Goethe called the city "lovely great depopulated" Ferrara.

Colomba, the owner of a sleepy and delicious trattoria, told me, "1800, 1900—those were abandoned times here. Only in the last five years has tourism picked up." A Lebanese chef, raised in Nigeria and trained in Italy, he had the kind of mixed heritage often concealed behind Italy's classic facade. He was cooking pastas with *ragù alla bolognese* and featherweight gnocchi in sage butter. Ferrara was once a center of Jewish life in Italy, and we sampled heritage dishes here like smoked eggplant and goose with grapefruit. The lack of industry, modernity, and population pressure has preserved the urban core more perfectly than in nearly any other large city in Italy, leaving a *centro storico* of gently curved pedestrian streets.

Ferrara is a humid city in the plains: hot, frequented by mosquitoes, where the women wave Chinese fans to stay cool. I made a rare nocturnal foray, slipping out on a sleeping wife and baby to walk the streets at 11 P.M. Lovely depopulated Ferrara was suddenly coursing with life, the plazas packed with hordes of beer-drinking young people. While eating pizza I made a naive, if profound, discovery about Italians. Everyone was hugging and kissing, slapping backs, the men holding hands, people in rapt conversations still checking cell phones and looking over their shoulder to miss no opportunity with another person. Personality and human relations lie at the core of Italian identity. I watched in amazement as an Italian gallant, clearly on a first date, abandoned his voluptuous companion to race into the street, hug an acquaintance, log some face time with him, engage in passionate push-me, pull-you argument with the pedestrian, and work hard at persuading his friend of something—and not return to his lady friend for a full fifteen minutes. Personality is an art form to Italians, the purpose of life.

HERE IS HOW YOU MAKE FRESH pasta dough: Mix flour and eggs together. That's it. There are some useful techniques and tricks, and you can call this dough *sfoglia* if you like, with a good Italian accent. But that is all that lies at the very heart of the secret of Italy's greatest regional cuisine. In Emilia-Romagna in general and in Bologna in particular, the genius of the table is simply fresh pasta. Once you get something right, the only advance comes from simplifying it, and Bologna is the place that gets things right. The city is known by a series of nicknames that shed some light on its history: Bologna the Fat, for its wealth, especially at the table; and Bologna the Red, originally for the dominant color scheme of its buildings and later for its politics. The city remains a Communist party stronghold, even as it is known as a city with the finest clothes, the best food, and the most beautiful homes in Italy. Medieval arches and porticoes line twenty-five miles of city blocks, and although there are some conspicuous tourist attractions here, like a pair of brick towers from the Middle Ages, the city is more "real" than Venice or Florence, oriented toward regular people and home to 100,000 students and some of the best food markets in the country.

I had a chance to put my high theory of cuisine to the test here—two chances, actually. Determined to have at my fingertips the secrets of Emilia-Romagna, I signed up for a couple of cooking classes.

The art of stone tiling reached its zenith here, in glittering works of gold and blue that put even Hagia Sophia to shame

The other class was an altogether more serious affair, a weeklong culinary tour of Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany led by noted foodie Mary Beth Clark, which I joined for a single day. We began at dawn beside Bologna's famous statue of Neptune, where Mary Beth pointed to some mysterious white stones embedded in a wall—signs of the original marketplace that thrived here in medieval times, when illiterate servants had to measure out their orders for bolts of cloth and roofing tiles against these standardized forms. We traipsed across the plaza for some early-morning shopping among the cheese and egg vendors, the makers of fresh pastas and cured meats. Then we crossed a few blocks to enter one of the city's most reserved and secretive in-

stitutions, the Club Bologna, in a sixteenth-century palazzo. (Trained among Bologna chefs, Mary Beth is the rare female member of this private entity.)

Forget the *nonnas*. We were greeted by a butler, served coffee by uniformed staff, and issued aprons and recipe collections for what would be a whirlwind effort to cook our way through a dozen classic dishes of the region. Assembling in the club's kitchen, guided by Mary Beth and the club's own chefs, we started with the same dishes I had done the night before: fresh pasta dough and a *ragù alla bolognese*. This is the sauce that conquered the world, at least in theory. Genuine *ragù alla bolognese* is a thick, almost dry sauce made with pork and beef that are coarsely chopped, a little tomato, and no garlic or herbs (salt is also little used, since it is present in so many local ingredients, like Parmesan cheese and prosciutto). True Bolognese sauce is used in baked lasagna, or as dressing on broad pastas that can support the meat, like tagliatelle. A Bolognese would sooner go out for Chinese than eat spaghetti alla bolognese, since the thin noodles leave a pile of meat behind in the bowl. In true meat-obsessed Bologna fashion, we also worked up a roast tenderloin and classic *polpetini* meatballs made with veal.

Mary Beth's theory was impeccable, her process professional enough to please even the doctrinaire chefs at Alma. She minced her own *soffritto* rather than using the stuff from the freezer section; she urged us to "harmonize" the *ragù alla bolognese* by using only the same vintage of wine we would be serving with the meal. A true purist, she even declined to put Parmesan cheese on the dish, which Bolognese regard as an unnecessary improvement. And she confirmed my base instinct about Po Valley soil by noting to the class that "if you understand geography, you understand what forms the people."

Among the guests was an amiable gray-haired Italian-born man traveling with his Australian wife. He often served as a kind of translator during the cooking, joking and grinning, but I was struck at one point when a shadow passed over his face. He had been talking to the elderly lady rolling out the pasta dough, and I caught a phrase in their rapid exchange that puzzled me: *figli della lupa*. With my dictionary Italian, I misunderstood this to mean "children of the wolf." Clearly it had nothing to do with cooking. I finally forced it out of him. These two gray-hairs, who lived continents apart for almost their whole lives, had found an instant point of common grief in their origins. What he had told the woman was, "We are both Children of the She-Wolf," a reference to Mussolini's Fascist version of the Boy Scouts, the Figli della Lupa. Here was a jolting connection to the old Italy of poverty and dread, recalled at leisure in a luxurious social club, in the relaxed terminus of long lives.

Emilia-Romagna offers plenty of reminders of this history, too. Although Mussolini was actually born here (in Forlì), the region was an anti-Fascist stronghold, and Bologna was the only city in Italy to liberate itself before Allied troops arrived. Northern Italy paid a steep price for this stubborn independence: In Bologna, Ravenna, and Modena, I had seen plaques listing the partisans who died at the hands of the Nazis, and in Ferrara there are plaques remembering the Jews deported to the death camps. Allied bombing and desperate, last-stand fighting by the Germans flattened some towns in the region. This history, combined with the incredible cruelty of the ruling medieval and Renaissance aristocrats, seemed like an incentive to live well while you could. We are all children of the wolf.

THE ADRIATIC COAST HAS RE-treated from Ravenna. We blew down the A1 from Ferrara and reached the onetime capital of the Byzantine Empire by mid-morning. This drive took us through the easternmost parts of Emilia-Romagna, flat and ugly in a way that only a foodie could love. ("Everything smells of pig shit," the author Bill Buford had said of Romagna, sighing with pleasure. "It's pig shit when you wake up, pig shit when you go to sleep, pig shit all day.") Anyone addicted to the Italian table knows what that stink produces, so buck up and breathe deep.

Romagna has more to offer than pig poo, fortunately. Our day was spent touring some of the world's greatest mosaic work, found in Byzantine churches and tombs dating back to the sixth century. I'd seen Roman and Byzantine mosaics in Syria, Turkey, and Lebanon. But the art of stone tiling reached its zenith here, in glittering works of gold and blue that put even Hagia Sophia in Istanbul to shame. In Ravenna, we devoured the famous portraiture in stone of the Basilica di Sant'Apollinare Nuovo and the tiny but stunning mausoleum of Galla Placidia. Then we finished the day with a sprint into the Romagna marshlands, where the very oldest mosaics lie inside the Abbey of Pomposa. There, in cool shade, I was distracted by the frescoes overhead illustrating Christ's life until I heard a suspicious squeak. I looked down but too late.

Bambino alert. Max was speed-crawling under a velvet rope, making his way onto the oldest mosaic in Italy. It is a section of flooring from A.D. 535, a closed archaeological site. Old stones were suddenly causing me a heart attack. Max four-pointed his way into the center, sat down, and, looking around in satisfaction, said, "Hup-hup-hup." He was drooling on treasures from the first millennium.

In America you might be arrested for this. In Emilia-Romagna they have a different attitude. A gray-haired docent dismissed all of my concerns using three languages (if you count sign language).

"*Kinder* okay," he said, and waved a hand. □

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